

A civil debate on gay marriage

By Jeff Jacoby, Globe Columnist | June 7, 2006

IN A STATEMENT opposing the Marriage Protection Amendment being debated in Congress this week, Senator Edward Kennedy says that "gay and lesbian couples deserve the same rights as married couples under state law" and dismisses the amendment as "a wholly inappropriate effort to override state courts and to intrude into individuals' private lives."

How should those who disagree with Kennedy's position react to it? By explaining on the merits why they believe he's wrong? Or by calling him names -- a "gay-loving fanatic," say, or an "immoral pervert"?

It's a no-brainer. Only a demagogue believes that the controversy over same-sex marriage can be improved by hurling insults at those who radically want to change the meaning of matrimony. Even if you think they are wrong, there is no reason to doubt that most Americans who favor legalizing gay and lesbian marriages see the issue as one of fairness and tolerance. Their arguments should be challenged with facts and logic, not vitriol. Anyone who slandered Kennedy with slurs like those above would be considered contemptible, and rightly so.

It is just as contemptible when the slurs and slander are hurled in the other direction.

"A vote for this amendment," Kennedy has said repeatedly, "is a vote for bigotry, pure and simple." Like so many on his side of the debate, he insists that supporters of the marriage amendment are fanatics and haters -- knuckle-draggers from "the rabid reactionary right" who want to "stain the Constitution with their language of bigotry," as he put it the last time the Senate took up the issue. If you are strongly committed to the traditional understanding of marriage as the union of husband and wife, in other words, you aren't just wrong -- you're evil. You aren't fit to debate with, only to demonize. Kennedy and his allies don't want to consider your point of view, and they don't want anyone else considering it either. And they know that there is no better way to make a viewpoint so toxic that decent Americans shun it than to portray it as the equivalent of racism and prejudice.

But if it's "bigotry, pure and simple" not to want same-sex marriage to be forced on American society by a handful of crusading courts, then among the bigots must be the large congressional majority -- 85 senators, 342 representatives -- who passed the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, confirming that marriage in the United States is between members of the opposite sex only and allowing states to deny recognition of same-sex marriages performed in other states. Then-President Bill Clinton must be a bigot too: He signed the bill into law.

The bigots must also include the dozens of American religious leaders who signed the Religious Coalition for Marriage statement endorsing the marriage amendment. The list of signatories is ecumenical -- Roman Catholic cardinals, Greek and Russian Orthodox primates, the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, Jewish rabbis, an apostle of the Mormon church, the president of the Coalition of African-American Pastors, the editor of Christianity Today, and many others. Bigots all, apparently.

Vastly more numerous are voters in the 19 states where constitutional amendments securing the definition of marriage have been put on the ballot. "In every case," as President Bush observed this week, "the amendments were approved by decisive majorities, with an average of 71 percent." All told, 45 of the 50 states either have adopted constitutional amendments or enacted laws meant to keep the timeless meaning of marriage from being undone. If Kennedy is right, all those states, all those lawmakers, all those voters should be despised as bigots.

But Kennedy isn't right.

It is not bigotry to insist that there is a good reason why marriage has existed in every known human society, and why it has always involved the uniting of men and women. It is not bigotry to acknowledge what reams of scholarship confirm: Family structure matters, and children are more likely to suffer problems when they are not raised by their married mothers and fathers. It is not bigotry to resist the dishonest comparison of same-sex marriage to interracial marriage -- skin color has nothing to do with wedlock, while sex is fundamental to it. And it is not bigotry to fear that a social change as radical as same-sex marriage could lead to grave and unintended consequences, from the persecution of religious institutions to a growing clamor for legalizing polygamy.

Pro, con, or undecided, Americans should be able to discuss something as serious as redefining marriage without resorting to slander and ad hominem attacks. There are sincere, compassionate, and thoughtful people on both sides of this issue. How can you tell who they are? They aren't the ones calling people bigots.

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